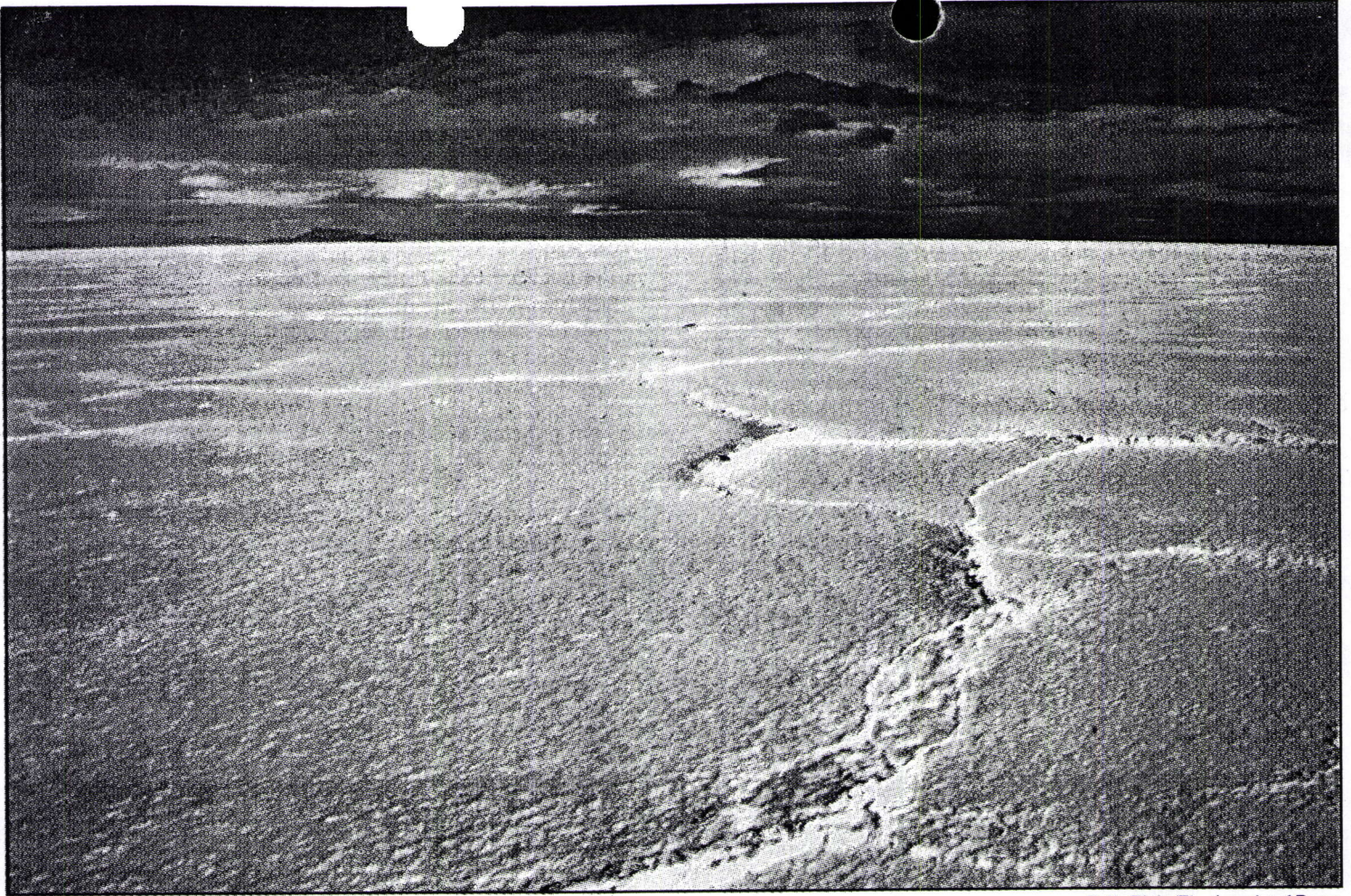


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Kelly Rigby/The Associated Press

The Bonneville Salt Flats, seen here in 1997, had less than a half inch of salt in spots. Mud was slowing race cars.

Bonneville Salt Flats Are Growing Saltier

Reilly Industries pumps brine back onto flats, making salt layer thicker and restoring raceway

BY HANNAH WOLFSON

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

It's springtime, and the Bonneville Salt Flats — where race car drivers have been breaking speed records for generations — are under water, a shallow pool mirroring the mountains beyond.

But in a few weeks, winter's rainwater will evaporate, leaving a blazing white stretch of salt that curves off into the distance like a shoreline with no ocean.

This year, the salt will probably be a little bit thicker than last.

About half an inch thicker, in fact — a total of 1.9 million tons of salt spread across 28,000 acres, according to the federal Bureau of Land Management, which reported the preliminary results of a 2-year-old salt restoration project.

The results are good news for racing enthusiasts, who are worried that the Bonneville Salt Flats are deteriorating,

the salt stripped away by mining and erosion.

"It's real exciting," said Rick Vesco, a race driver who helped found Save the Salt, the group that pushed for the salt restoration. "It was getting so that there wasn't going to be any more salt flats."

Save the Salt began in 1989, when the drivers who gather on the flats each summer noticed the salt was so thin that the sticky mud underneath was slowing down their cars. The seven-mile loop used to be nearly twice as long, and parts of the track had some 18 inches of salt in the 1940s.

Vesco said it's now down below a half-inch in spots.

Actually, that's just the upper salt crust, created from sodium chloride that percolates from the soil into the winter rainwater. The salt is left behind when the water evaporates, then is polished smooth by the desert winds.

Below that is a layer of gypsum up to an inch thick, then 3 to 5 inches of hard, porous salt, then another stratum of gypsum and another of salt. At the base is the mudbed of ancient Lake Bonneville, which covered a third of what is now Utah about 15,000 years ago.

The flats — so wide you can see the curvature of the Earth — are famous for their perfect racetrack, which has been used since the 1910s.

But for almost as long, the gleaming expanse on the Utah-Nevada state line has also been mined for potash fertilizer.

Reilly Industries, which bought the Bonneville potash plant from Kaiser Chemical in 1988, forces water through canals crisscrossing the flats into evaporation ponds, from which the potash is removed. But the process also strips an estimated 850,000 tons of salt from the

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Rick Egan/The Salt Lake Tribune

last fall in Provo Canyon. "Cast-in-place" concrete piers to the tunnel portals beginning next spring.

know. He spent 100 days in 1998 fishing his farm adjacent to the new road. This year, he averaged 50 days.

"All I worry about is the new road has more places along it for people to park. This canyon could get a lot more crowded, and I don't like that," Furr says.

Salt Flats Get an Extra Half Inch of Salt

■ Continued from B-1

flats each year, leaving it in the ponds in heaps up to 4 feet high.

Now Reilly is reversing the process and pumping brine back out onto the flats — as much as 7,000 gallons per minute. The company, which is spending \$1 million in initial expenses and \$80,000 a year to maintain the pumps, estimates that when the water evaporates, it should leave half an inch of new salt per year.

Save the Salt negotiated a deal under which Reilly puts up the money and BLM monitors the results.

"This will be a good way to get the message out that industry isn't always the bad guy," said Reilly vice president Jackie Simmons. "We're out there doing some good."

The laydown project began in November 1997, with the plan of pumping 1.5 million tons of salt onto the flats each year for at least five years. That first winter, breakdowns and other glitches meant only 825,000 tons went out.

"And we're trying to figure out how to maintain not just this geologic oddity and landmark, but also its historical use."

Don Banks
BLM spokesman

But this winter, the project exceeded expectations. An estimated 1.9 million tons were pumped back out.

The first driver to run on the salt was Teddy Tezloff, who set a record of 141.73 mph in 1914 in a Blitzen Benz. Craig Breedlove set a land speed record of 600.6 mph in the 1960s. Gary Gabelich, set a record of 622.4 mph in 1970.

But lately, top racers have migrated to Nevada's Black Rock Desert. They say the dry riverbed has more speed.

Save the Salt hopes the salt restoration will re-establish Bonneville's claim as the nation's fastest test track. The group wants to keep the flats white and gleaming.

"They're a nearly unique geological phenomenon," said BLM spokesman Don Banks. "And we're trying to figure out how to maintain not just this geologic oddity and landmark, but also its historical use."

raining, and her campaign ended poorly. Hanson finished behind Gov. Mike Leavitt. Independent Merrill

he last-place finish, he praised Holbrook for "a job well done" and noted the campaign accomplished all of its goals from winning.

em curious Holbrook was effective in helping to create a unified voice. As an outsider, a Catholic, and a South working in the

helped candidates and older articulate party members. He ended the Democrats in the mainstream and in the end against some harsh criticism. He had driven many in the GOP.

prawl, fighting crime, and guns sensibly, elimi-

way they used to and has prompted some Democrats to criticize the party for drifting from its traditional roots as advocates of labor, gay rights and abortion rights.

"They have less clout in the party these days," said one prominent Democrat who favored the shift in focus.

Democratic Sen. Ed Mayne, president of the Utah AFL-CIO, dismisses the idea that fractures have formed in the party because of the new message.

"Do we disagree sometimes? Sure we do, but that's like any other organization," he said. "Meg has made sure to make all the factions of the Democratic Party feel welcome under the tent."

Holbrook's husband suggested being an outsider has given his wife invaluable perspective on

Solid candidates meant no Democratic primaries, and the party ended up with two additional state Senate seats and one in the House.

Months ago Holbrook began to line up candidates for 2000. "You have to be strategic and look at least four years down the road," she said.

Holbrook is not strictly a Democratic partisan. She's also a Utah partisan.

Every Friday she has a packet faxed to the White House. It includes news clippings on federal issues, especially the military and the environment. It's her way of keeping the administration aware of what's going on in a state that does not have a Democrat occupying any of its five congressional seats.

The Western Presidential Primary is another way Holbrook has championed the state's inter-

candidates of both parties.

Mickey Ibarra, an aide to Clinton in the White House and a former Utahn, said Holbrook is filling a void of Utah Democrats in Washington. In an arena where Utah's interests face intense competition, he praises her for being persistent and patient.

"You have to have a good dose of both to be successful here," he said of the White House.

There has been talk about Holbrook stepping out from behind the scenes someday and into the political limelight.

Taylor, the party's director, said she might prefer the role of kingmaker to king. Graham said Holbrook would make an appealing candidate.

Holbrook's husband sounded especially enthusiastic about the idea.

"She could be a very effective candidate — and a very effective